Clusters of Scholarly Prominence Program: Supplementary Guidelines

February 17, 2021

The Clusters of Scholarly Prominence Program (CSPP) is UTSC's new flagship program for supporting the pursuit of strategic initiatives. Its objective is to elevate UTSC's provincial, national, and international profile as a cluster of research excellence and multidisciplinary collaboration in a number of areas. The CSPP provides $100,000-$200,000 per year for a three-year period, with the option of an additional two years of funding, pending satisfactory reviews of annual progress.

A description of the program, including the application form and deadlines, can be found at: https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/research/sites/utsc.utoronto.ca.research/files/docs/CSPP%20Guidelines%20and%20Forms%20for%20OVPR%20Wepage%20-%207Feb2020.pdf

The inaugural 2020 CSPP competition, the selection and funding of the first research clusters, and their early stage implementation, have been accompanied by requests for further information about the program. This supplementary document provides answers to the most frequent questions which have arisen to date.

I. Eligibility Criteria

1. The CSPP identifies a number of criteria that proposed initiatives must meet. They include new research collaborations that:

- seek big and transformative impacts on Canadian society and beyond by addressing questions that transcend traditional disciplinary and departmental boundaries

- entail multi-disciplinary collaborations of 5-10 faculty that include at least two different disciplines and departments/centres at UTSC

- have significant potential to attract self-sustaining external competitive funding, including from Canada's tri-agencies, beyond the period covered by the CSPP award

- have significant potential to attract new top-tier faculty and high-quality trainees

- support training opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students and postdoctoral fellows

Q: Are these criteria weighted equally or are some more important than others?

A: Successful CSPPs are expected to meet all criteria. However, the capacity to have a transformative impact through multidisciplinary collaborations is critical. Projects that do not meet this threshold will not be funded even if they meet the other criteria.

2. Cluster leads are required to have suitable experience for leading the cluster, and an established or emerging record of global leadership and excellence in the proposed research area.

Q: Do these criteria mean that only senior Associate Professors or Full Professors can be cluster leads?

A: There is no expectation that cluster leads will be Full or senior Associate Professors. What matters is their expertise and leadership in the proposed research area and evidence of their capacity to lead a team of researchers and, if applicable, community partners.

3. Are teaching-stream faculty eligible to lead a research cluster?

A: Since CSPPs are required to be capable of being financially self-sustaining after the initial start up funds, the cluster lead must be eligible to apply for external funding. Teaching-stream faculty who are not eligible to apply for external grants should have a research-stream co-lead who is eligible to apply for external grants.

4. A research cluster requires collaboration of faculty across more than one discipline. How do I put together a multi-disciplinary team? How do I find scholars in other disciplines who would be appropriate members of my research cluster?

A: The appropriate members of your research cluster are those who collectively have the expertise needed to address the research questions your CSPP is addressing. If you are not already familiar with faculty in other departments working on related projects, you will need to devote some time to finding them, including by scrutinizing departmental websites and contact departmental chairs as well as individual faculty. The Office of the Vice-Principal Research and Innovation (OVPRI) may also be able to help identify potential cluster members.

5. If cluster members come from a department/centre that includes more than one discipline, does the CSPP still need to include at least one other department/discipline in the research cluster?

A: Yes.

6. Is there administrative support available from the OVPRI for the development of a research cluster?

A: Yes. The OVPRI can provide informational and administrative assistance. Please contact Dr. Suhail Asrar (suhail.asrar@utoronto.ca) with any questions or requests.

II. The Application Form and Adjudication Process

7. How much time should I allot to putting together a CSPP application?

A. Leads of successful CSPPs in the first competition reported spending significant amounts of time over a few years to put together their cluster. This time entailed wide consultation so as to include faculty with shared research interests, to discuss and arrive at coordinated research themes and questions, and to incorporate feedback into the cluster proposal. Successful clusters were built out from smaller teams that had worked together in the past. CSPPs that involve community partners entail relationship-building over several years. CSPPs can be built out from ISI proposals (see section IV below for information on ISIs) but the latter take time (12 – 18 months) to put together. In all cases, there is a lot of work involved in putting together a successful CSPP application.

8. A Notice of Intent must be submitted by May 4th. What is the purpose of the NOI? Are NOIs adjudicated?

A. The NOI is used by the OVPRI to identify appropriate reviewers in advance for CSPP applications and to connect applicants with overlapping foci. NOIs are not adjudicated.

9. Can I get feedback on my proposed CSPP application from the OVPRI – either before I submit the NOI (May 4) or before the application is due (June 15)?

A. Yes, the OVPRI will provide feedback. CSPP leads who are also submitting an ISI (see section IV below) are also encouraged to workshop their CSPP through the ISI initiative at St. George (https://research.utoronto.ca/secure/institutional-strategic-initiatives/funding-strategic-initiatives).

10. The application form includes a maximum 6-page proposal that includes a literature review. Are references in this review included in the 6-page proposal?

A: No.

11. The application form lists "Other" as an eligible budgetary expense. What expenses fall into the "Other" category?

A. Expenses that are not explicitly listed as either eligible or non-eligible.

12. The application states that letters of support are needed from the cluster's leads (or co-leads) Departmental chairs. Is this letter needed when the Department is not providing any type of support (funding or in-kind)?

A: Yes.

13. If the Department chair/centre director is a member of the research cluster, who should write the letter of support?

A: The Associate Chair or, for Department's that do not have such a position, the Chair's designate.

14. What is the budget year for CSPPs?

A: September 1st of the year in which the award is made – August 31st of the subsequent year.

15. What is the adjudication process for CSPP applications?

A: The OVPRI solicits two external referees. Beginning with the 2021 competition, it will seek input from CSPP leads for suitable as well as unsuitable referees.

The Adjudication committee consists of the Principal; Vice-Principal Research and Innovation' the Associate Vice-Principal Research, Strategic Initiatives; and Vice-Principal Academic and Dean.

16. What is the expected success rate?

A: The success rate was 50% in the inaugural competition in 2020; there were eight applications and four were funded for a total amount of $2.4 million. There is no expectation, however, that the success rate will always be this high.

17. Is it possible to get information about the funded CSPP?

A: Yes, a description of them is on the OVPRI website at: https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/research/clusters-scholarly-prominence-program-cspp

You can also contact the CSPP leads directly (contact information is available via the above-noted website).

17. Q: How many CSPPs does UTSC expect to fund over the next 5 years?

A: It is expected that there will be 5 to 10 clusters funded across the next 5 years.

III. Executing the CSPP

18. Is there administrative support for the operation of a CSPP?

A: CSPPs should build administrative support into their budget. In addition, UTSC is establishing Research Institutes that will provide administrative support for the CSPP. In the interim, and until the Directors of the Research Institutes are in place, the OVPRI will support the development and operation of CSPPs.

19. Once a CSPP is funded, how much flexibility is there to adjust the time-lines with respect to its activities and budgetary timelines?

A: Yes. The OVPRI recognizes that unforeseen contingencies, like Covid-19, can disrupt original timelines for project activities and justify the reallocation of budgetary items (for example, away from in-person meeting costs to other project tasks). CSPP leads can consult with the OVPRI prior to adjusting timelines and budgetary items, and/or justify budgetary reallocations and timeline adjustments in their annual report.

20. Are CSPPs open to new members once they've received funding?

A: The expectation is that new members will be able to join funded CSPPs. Whether they will receive project funding will, however, be a decision of the CSPP lead or oversight committee.

IV. The CSPP and University of Toronto Institutional Strategic Initiatives (ISI) Program

21: Are these two programs complementary? Can I apply to both?

A: Yes, the CSPP and ISI are complementary, and faculty can apply to both

Both the CSPP and ISI have the objective of funding interdisciplinary research networks with the potential for high-impact scholarship and training and external funding. But they also differ. The CSPP does not require cross-divisional collaboration, while the ISI coordinates university-wide and divisional resources to support its mandate. There are two funding streams to the ISI. The Institutional Initiatives program supports the launch and implementation of large-scale interdisciplinary and cross-divisional research networks deemed a priority by the University of Toronto. The Divisional Initiatives program supports strategic research networks that are priorities for partner Divisions.

22: Can CSPP leads apply directly to the ISI Divisional Initiatives program for funding of their research network?

A: No. Effective 2021, UTSC faculty need the support of the UTSC VPRI to apply for funding under this program.